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SYRIA: REACTION TO UNILATERAL ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL

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SYRIA: Reaction to Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal

Summary

A unilateral Israeli withdrawal would not be a sufficient inducement--even in the face of Arab pressure--for Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon. At a minimum, we believe Assad would demand that Gemayel abrogate or shelve the 17 May Agreement, make concessions to Syria's Muslim allies in Lebanon, and accommodate Syrian security concerns. Even if Gemayel negotiates with Damascus, Assad might decide that a Syrian pull out would pose an unacceptable risk of heightened Iranian involvement, Palestinian reinfiltration, sectarian polarization, and renewed civil war. He might also try to link a resolution in Lebanon to a US commitment to move ahead with a broader peace process that included Syrian recovery of the Golan Heights.

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Damascus probably would not move its troops into Beirut or southern Lebanon to avoid prompting a reintroduction of Israeli forces. The collapse of the Lebanese Government or a move by the Lebanese Army that threatened a Syrian client, however, might precipitate deeper Syrian military involvement.

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We believe the Israeli Defense Force strongly favors a total withdrawal from Lebanon perhaps as early as May. Nonetheless, Israel is still intent on having a Lebanese brigade based on Christian surrogate forces to ensure security in the South even though Beirut has shown little inclination to pursue the idea.

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President Assad almost certainly anticipates that continuing casualties and mounting domestic political pressure ultimately will compel a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. From his perspective, such a move would vindicate Syria's position that Israel should comply with UN resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal and that the 17 May Agreement is unacceptable. A complete Israeli withdrawal would diminish the security threat to Syria by removing Israeli troops and monitoring stations in the southern Bekaa Valley.

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Assad probably also would view an Israeli withdrawal as a preliminary step to US and MNF withdrawal. We believe he would increase the pressure on President Gemayel to abandon the "US card" and negotiate an accommodation with Damascus.

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Damascus probably would not move its troops back into Beirut or southern Lebanon following an Israeli withdrawal. Syria would avoid any action that might prompt the reintroduction of Israeli forces. The collapse of the Lebanese Government or a move by the Lebanese Army that threatened a Syrian client, however, might precipitate deeper Syrian military involvement to prevent any faction from achieving dominance at Syria's expense.

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President Gemayel's reaction would be a critical factor determining Assad's next steps. If Gemayel moves to implement provisions of the 17 May Agreement, seeks to extract a greater US commitment to his government, or refuses to accommodate Syrian interests, Syrian troops would remain in place. Saudi and international pressure alone would not be sufficient to compel Damascus to pull out. Should Gemayel decide to shelve the agreement, offer concessions to Syria's Lebanese Muslim allies, and accommodate Syrian security concerns, Damascus would have less reason to stay.

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Syrian withdrawal would not necessarily follow, however, even if the Israelis pull out and Gemayel begins negotiations with Damascus. The Syrians have looked for a political solution in Lebanon favorable to their interests since 1975 and have failed. A Syrian withdrawal without a political resolution opens up possibilities for several outcomes unacceptable to Damascus:

- heightened Iranian involvement and the emergence of a radical Islamic state;
- Palestinian reinfestation, continuing sectarian polarization, and a risk of a replay of the 1982 fighting; or

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-- a Christian Phalange regime closely linked to Israel.

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Assad might also conclude that resolution in Lebanon might encourage a US-sponsored PLO-Jordanian entry into the peace process to the exclusion of Syria. We believe he wants to maintain dominant influence in Lebanon and over the PLO as bargaining leverage in a comprehensive peace settlement. He may try to link Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon to a US commitment to move ahead with a broader peace process that would include Syrian recovery of the Golan Heights and a solution to the Palestinian problem acceptable to Syria's Palestinian allies.

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